

Book Reviews

ANGELENE NAW. 2001. *Aung San and the Struggle for Burmese Independence*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. Notes. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. ISBN 87-87062-96-8.

Of the major Southeast Asian nationalist leaders to emerge at the end of World War Two, perhaps none is so sketchily known as Boggyoke (General) Aung San (1915-1947), a legend in his own right as the “father of Burmese independence” and now remembered also as the father of the contemporary champion of resistance to the Myanmar regime, Nobel prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Compared to Sukarno and Ho Chi Minh, he did not live even to see his country officially reach independence, which meant not only that his life was only about half as long as theirs but that it was sealed in something like a vacuum of heroism at a very early stage. He rose to prominence very rapidly and in times and conditions which were not conducive to the recording of even important details, never mind calm assessments. Further, it would be an understatement to say that the political and intellectual atmosphere in Myanmar for the past half-century has, in a number of ways, made a scholarly assessment of Aung San and his historical role rather difficult.

Angelene Naw (Myanmar: Naw Angelene), who in the 1990s served as Director of Tourism Promotion in Yangon and now teaches history at Judson College (Illinois), thus took a big step when she conceived this book. Based closely on her 1988 doctoral dissertation for the University of Hawaii, it is intended to go beyond the few existing works in English, which have provided considerable material but not yet a comprehensive biographical study, and – implicitly – those appearing in Myanmar, which have tended to be piecemeal as well as rather personal and uncritical in their portrayals of Aung San. The author has drawn together and sifted through a wide variety of primary and secondary sources in English and Myanmar, most of them already reasonably well known, and conducted several late-1980s interviews with important figures such as U Nu and Daw Khin Kyi, Aung San’s wife. The result is a welcome and competent introduction to Aung San and national political trajectory that led to independence, helpful reading for those relatively new to Myanmar’s history in the early 20th century, and for readers more familiar with the subject, a useful summary for quick reference.

Three sorts of shortcomings must be mentioned, however. The first has to do with sources. It is perhaps understandable that no archival sources from the Yangon side have been consulted, but a little more puzzling is the author’s apparent reluctance to utilize her interviews: in a well-annotated book, less than a half-dozen citations, and none at all of the interview(s?) with Daw Khin Kyi. It would be interesting to know why. In addition, a few important publications have escaped mention. Some are earlier works that appear to have been passed over in the original dissertation. For example, Patricia Herbert’s short but influential reappraisal of the Saya San rebellion (1982) ought to have been consulted or at least mentioned, for some of the issues it raised might have sparked a useful discussion of Aung San’s understanding of populism. Also, the bibliography of the original dissertation does not appear to have been changed, save for inclusion of a 1992 reprint of G.E. Harvey’s classic history of modern Burma (1946), and as a result a few important studies have been left out. Kin Oung’s discussion of the assassination of Aung San (1993), for example, certainly should have been included; the account given here of that momentous event is not only colorless but astonishingly perfunctory.

That point leads us to a second problem: Angelene Naw's account repeatedly steers well clear of obvious controversy, leaving a good many questions unanswered and even unposed. Some of this avoidance may be due to a justifiable desire to avoid unwarranted speculation and to present in a straightforward manner what the available evidence tells us. Repeating amusing (and often probably apocryphal) childhood tales is one thing, but trotting out nasty (and often probably politically motivated) gossip is quite another; why do it? To her credit, the author prefers to raise several important and still controversial issues, such as Aung San's view of the "minorities problem," in a matter-of-fact fashion – here is what he said and did – and to ignore what cannot be treated this way. But sometimes the price of this ultra-pasteurized approach is too high. One is scarcely aware, for example, of the nature or even the existence of significant opposition to Aung San at any time during his political life. This leaves us with a lopsided, unrealistic view, particularly at the end of World War Two. We should be at least introduced, to take only one instance, to the ideas and activities of the National Opposition Front, which does not receive a single mention. Similarly, questions touching on Aung San's relations with Ne Win (and others of the Thirty Comrades), frequently discussed in recent years, are – unjustifiably, I think – passed over in silence.

A final shortcoming has to do with more nebulous but still very significant questions of Aung San's character, and of the roots and nature of his virtually universally acclaimed, but little examined, charisma. Angelene Naw tries to give some insight into Aung San as a child and retells a number of anecdotes about his young-adult sloppiness and other unlovely characteristics, which she reads as indicative of his admirable single-mindedness, honesty, and so forth. (My reading of the anecdotal evidence she offers is, alas, that he was a dreadfully spoiled brat.) She does not, however, mention his temper, which even as an adult he seems never to have conquered. Aung San remains in this biography a rather bloodless figure whose personality is vague and overshadowed by his political activities, and whose family life is never discussed (it is especially curious that Daw Khin Kyi receives only the sparest mention in the text and none in the index). The precise nature of his "leadership" is not ruminated upon although it is a key topic; his appeal to "the masses" is neither questioned nor explained, and neither his use of nor his discomfort with such adulation are brought satisfactorily to light. Is this the result of cultural norms, or political caution? Or of the author's unwillingness to stray from the narrow path of what she conceives as a political biography? Whatever the reason, by the end of this book there is still a great deal about Aung San that remains undiscussed and, in a hollow sort of way, mysterious. Whether the sources exist to do much more without being unacceptably speculative is unclear, but there is still room for someone to try.

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PARIMAL GHOSH. 2000. *Brave Men of the Hills: Resistance and Rebellion in Burma, 1825-1932*. London: Hurst & Co. Glossary. Bibliography. Index. ISBN 1-85065-407-7.

The opening paragraph of Parimal Ghosh's *Brave Men of the Hills* immediately identifies the two different forms of Burmese resistance and rebellion which are the concerns of his study: the nineteenth century localised resistance which followed the three Anglo-Burmese Wars and the Saya San Rebellion of 1930-32. Through a detailed analysis of colonial documents and secondary sources, Ghosh unearths the process whereby nineteenth century peasant resistance crystallised in 1930-32 as an open challenge to the colonial state.

Early twentieth century textbooks virtually ignored early Burmese resistance to colonial rule, preferring instead to consider the period in terms of a 'pacification' process. In more recent times, considerable attention has been directed towards the study of the 1930-32 rebellion. Until now, however, there have been few attempts to consider the process of Burmese resistance and rebellion over an extended period. Ghosh's book contributes notably to this field, by placing the Saya San Rebellion in the context of a broader political and economic narrative of resistance.

The initial chapter focuses on early forms of resistance to the British after the First and the Second Anglo-Burmese Wars. Ghosh traces these developments in Lower Burma on a village level, concentrating on local level officials, including the *Myothugyis* and the *Thugyis*, as well as the authority vested in the Buddhist *Sangha*. According to Ghosh, early forms of resistance in Tenasserim after the First War were often ambiguous. Crime and resistance merged together, and the disjointed and disorganised revolts by local villagers were categorised solely as law and order problems in the colonial reports. A more critical examination of these colonial reports combined with an analysis of indigenous sources may clarify this ambiguity.

The narrative of peasant militancy is continued in the second chapter, which takes up the story of Burmese resistance in Upper Burma after the third Anglo-Burmese War. Through an in-depth study of the British crime reports, Ghosh details the struggle of local leaders as they took up arms to protect their interests against the increasingly intrusive administration of the British. Ghosh identifies several strata of leadership and support which resembled the positions of authority in pre-British Burma. Firstly, there were the princes of the royal family who lent their arms or their names to various rebel groups. Next were the so-called pretenders to the throne, then the *Wun* (Governor) and the *Ahmudans* (the 'rank and file'). Ghosh concludes this chapter by arguing that forms of resistance to British rule had begun to progress from localised incidents to a nationalised and centrally organised war of resistance.

The third chapter is concerned with the world of the peasant after the British takeover, and, in particular, the effect of the commercialisation of agriculture on their ways of life. By focusing on rents, land ownership percentages, tenant profits and losses and taxes and duties, Ghosh builds up an important picture of indebtedness and landloss as a condition of living for a large majority of the peasantry. According to Ghosh, discontent over the effect of the colonial economic policy was the cause for the gradual build-up of tension in the countryside. These developments came to be articulated through organised channels, such as the Greater Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) which led boycott agitations and ultimately led to the revolts of 1930-32.

The Saya San Rebellion, the story of Saya San's involvement in the GCBA and the growing importance of the *wunthanu athin* (village associations) is retold in

the final chapter. The strength of this chapter lies in the bringing to the foreground discussion about the transition of the politics of resistance from its localised form to an emerging sense of pan-Burmese politics. Modern politics became popularised and militant in urban Burma in the 1920s, and much of the leadership stemmed from the *sangha*. If these demands, however, were to appeal to the peasantry they needed to be translated into a language which was familiar. Therefore, Saya San who had trained in the GCBA, drew upon the symbols of the monarchy to express an alternative to the colonial state. This casting of Saya San's politics as both traditional Buddhist and modern-secular has been considered by scholars in the field for a considerable time, and unfortunately Ghosh has very little new insight to add. Whilst Ghosh draws on previous scholarship and the colonial reports, he overlooks the inherent problems in the colonial sources, and throughout the chapter he relies heavily on just two colonial reports.

The concluding chapter offers greater insight and reflections on peasant militancy and national resistance. Issues surrounding how the Burmese adjusted to British administration and what actually constituted Burmese resistance and revolt are discussed within the framework of the Anglo-Burmese Wars and the Saya San Rebellion. It is this pulling together of the main strands of nineteenth and early twentieth century Burmese resistance which will be of most interest to historians of Burma and of peasant revolts. Ghosh provides a significant framework concerning rebellions and revolts in his analysis of the colonial sources. This framework could be used as a basis for further research using Burmese language sources.

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STEINBERG, DAVID I. *Burma: The State of Myanmar*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press. Preface. Notes. Glossary. Appendix. Index. ISBN 0-87840-842-8.

In his new book, David Steinberg introduces the reader to the minutiae of Burma's polity, society, and foreign affairs in the course of two background chapters, seven thematic chapters, and a conclusion. His analysis of the forces involved, that is, the Burmese military, the opposition, and foreign powers, lets him adopt a rather pessimistic view as to the possibility of positive change.

Steinberg portrays the military as preoccupied by internal security and xenophobia, factors which motivated them to swell their ranks, purchase much new hardware, and put economic enterprises, a separate infrastructure and utilities at their own disposal. Consequently, the military is shown to control the country more tightly than ever and to be unwilling to abandon its position.

The influence of the military encompasses mass organizations such as the cooperative movement and the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) with millions of members, many of them being non-politicized, but others being at the ready for activities against the opposition or as the nucleus of a future political party. Burmese civil society Steinberg sees as having faltered after the parliamentary period (1948–62), although NGOs help to build up some civic organizations on the local level.

The situation resulting from this power structure is likewise presented in a gloomy light. Steinberg's judgment is particularly damning on economic matters: although Burma is rich in natural resources and was fitted with strong foundations for economic development, incompetent dirigisme over decades, coupled with several waves of demonetization and a cumbersome foreign trade regime, stifled growth and directed entrepreneurial activity onto the black market. Even though the post-1988 governments have embraced a free-market economy operations by name, official distrust in the private sector is still paramount, expressed in a continued emphasis on central planning and support for public enterprises. Furthermore, the country's lack of capital and efficient banking may leave it to Chinese, Indians, and military officials to appropriate most profits, preventing the emergence of a strong Burmese middle class.

Another combination of laissez-faire policies, a refusal to legally acknowledge autonomy, and a lack of crucial investment is mirrored in Steinberg's description of the minority problems. Cease-fires gave some ethnicities a free hand in logging, narcotics, and other occupations, whereas investment in the border areas has not come up to expectations. Moreover, the military government's reluctance to underwrite substantial regional autonomy is likely to fuel a spirit of defiance.

It is shown that the resulting social situation is dire for the large share of the population being below or close to the poverty line, being landless peasants, or both. Rampant inflation and low wages have eroded the people's purchasing power. The educational achievements necessary to develop the country and raise one's own income have been compromised by dropping figures of school attendance and universities being closed for years. In the health sector, spending is low as well, with child nourishment improving only slightly, while HIV is close to becoming endemic. The narcotics trade poses another conundrum, in which the military, stepping up its control over the country's periphery, might have to assume more responsibility in fighting both poppy agriculture and the industrial production of amphetamines.

In the international arena, Steinberg argues that Burma has gained prominence for both economic and political reasons. Close links to China were convenient as long as they helped to develop the border trade, garnered political support, and secured arms deliveries, but more recently the Burmese government has been finding the relationship too close for comfort. Similarly, Burma's Southeast Asian neighbors' intention to loosen the China connection may have have speeded up Burma's entry into ASEAN. In political terms, Steinberg presumes, membership in the regional connection may remain of marginal importance. So has been the impact of US sanctions, which have been promoting the acceptance of the elections of 1990 and the virtual removal of the SPDC from power. Steinberg is outspoken in his condemnation of the US position, who, he holds, can afford taking the high moral ground precisely because they have no major interests in Burma, whereas on Vietnam and China US critique is much more subdued.

On future prospects, Steinberg is pessimistic that deeply entrenched tensions, exacerbated by the military, can be overcome. He sees no alternative to gradualism: cautious consultations, informal feelers, face-saving solutions, and the acceptance of Burmese sensitivities should form the basis for economic and political reform, which then might be required as a quid pro quo for resuming and expanding foreign economic assistance. Still, the author fears that a gradual approach may be unpalatable to the strong anti-SPDC forces in the USA, the NLD; likewise, he presumes that it may be unavoidable to accept a continuously strong political role of the military, although, again, the other players are unlikely to consent.

In total, the material presented to the reader is very rich, although one would have wished for a separate section on the opposition and its plans. Steinberg's argumentation is clear and well founded, and the events having taken place since 2001 have given little cause to question his analysis. More careful copyediting, however, might have increased the use of the book. Thus, some overlapping between the chapters might have been removed, and perhaps it would have been better to arrange the background information (chs. 1-2) in chronological sequence. More footnote references would have been useful as well, as would have a more comprehensive bibliography at the end.

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ANTHONY WEBSTER. 1998. *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East Asia 1770-1890*. London: Tauris Academic Studies. Bibliography. Index. 1-86064-1717.

Anthony Webster's *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in South East Asia 1770-1890* connects many strands of recent research on the both the region and the development of the British empire. Webster seeks to do nothing less than trace the role that metropolitan capitalism played in the formation of imperial policy in Southeast Asia. Drawing primarily on secondary literature, *Gentlemen Capitalists* explores the interconnections between commercial interests and the growth of British power in the region.

Webster builds on a wealth of recent scholarship about South Asia, Southeast Asia and British imperialism to offer a picture which is "revisionist in intent"(20). To begin with, Webster utilizes scholarship which has called attention to the 'military fiscalism'(17) to better understand the motivations for British expansion in and around India. At the same time, the attention given to local state formation by scholars such as Victor Lieberman and I.G. Brown and C. Rajchagool are significant because they are useful in reconstructing the diplomatic challenges faced by the states in the region. Webster also pays attention to the studies which have probed the Chinese commercial networks (which preceded the British).

With respect to British imperialism, Webster follows P. J.Cain and A. G. Hopkins *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914* (London, 1993) to argue against the idea that British interest in Southeast Asia was primarily as a destination for British manufactured goods. Industrial expansion was important during the second half of the 19th century, but it played a "supplementary role" (21). Instead, he sees the growing British commitment to free trade as playing a critical and destabilizing role in the region. Free trade, coupled with the reluctance of British merchants to pay local monopoly prices "ensured that revenues which flowed from trade tended to enrich indigenous merchants, local chiefs and other rivals to the central authority of the local state." In other words, the impact of British commercial practice was to destabilize local governments. For Webster the resultant instability then threatened to undermine commerce, leaving British "merchants with powerful arguments with which to persuade London of the necessity for intervention and conquest."(20).

Webster carries this out by showing that it was not manufacturing interests which were decisive in the formation of British policy, but 'gentleman capitalists'. This term refers to the class of merchants and financiers "in London, whose proximity to the centre of power in the capital lent them considerable political influence."(14)

Webster's argument took account of the commercial factors on the imperial periphery, but the most important were these metropolitan gentlemen capitalists. These figures and the financial capital they represented lay behind the retention of Singapore, the establishment of the residency system in Malaya, the final conquest of Burma and the creation of an informal empire in Siam.

Despite the fact that Webster uses the idea of the gentlemen capitalist to organize his narrative, the first two Anglo-Burman wars resulted from other causes. Webster draws upon Thant Myint-U's work to show that some of the origins of the first conflict came from the successful state building of the Konbaung dynasty. The growing power of the Burmese state brought it into conflict with the British, who reacted to it as another Indian land power. Nonetheless, he rejects historical interpretations which had placed the responsibility for the war largely with the Burmese. In Webster's view the militarism of the British ensured that there would be a "ferocious response" (144) to the Burmese. This war was of critical significance: the Burmese state's loss of territory undermined its viability as a state. The loss of Arakan, Tenasserim and Assam meant the loss of key sources of revenue; it also would mean that future governments would have to place greater burdens on their remaining territories.

The Second Anglo-Burman War also could not be attributed to the influence of "gentlemen capitalists". Instead, the main causes and motives behind the conflict came in "Calcutta rather than at the 'frontier' in Rangoon" (154). Webster sees Lord Dalhousie as responsive to political opinion in India which supported conflict. Interests in Burma's teak forests and other economic possibilities made British leaders in India regard the weakened kingdom as a target. The second Anglo-Burmese war, then, is not the work of 'gentlemen capitalists' but is "best understood as 'sub imperialism' in which political and economic concerns on the periphery of empire precipitated a new phase of imperial expansion." (155)

Webster points out that the scholars have not adequately studied the fate of the Burmese kingdom after the second conflict. The Second Anglo-Burman War left the Burmese state in an even more precarious position than the first conflict. Mindon's government inherited not only the enmity with the British, but diminished resources and, as a result, he spent his energies "trying to rule a broken country" (217). By 1885 the political and economic collapse of the kingdom—caused "largely by the effects of earlier conflicts with the British—was virtually inevitable.

However, unlike the first two conflicts, British motivations for the third Anglo-Burman War came from gentlemen capitalists. The Burmese state's conflict with the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation (BBTC) furnished British leaders with a pretext for conquest. Webster locates Wallace Brothers, a London firm established in 1862 with connections to both the BBTC and the cotton industry, as prime movers in calling for intervention in Burma in 1885. By the 1880s Wallace Brothers which "epitomized gentlemanly capitalism" (227) had become a leading financial house in London. This firm was able to affect the intelligence about Burma (and more critically, the growing French influence in the country) regarded the BBTC's case and the crisis of the Burmese state more generally as a threat to its prosperity. Despite the importance of Wallace Brothers, Webster also shows that Lord Rothschild (another gentlemanly capitalist) devoted significant resources to obtaining exclusive mining rights in Burma. In this last act of conquest, then, the gentlemen capitalists were decisive in the forming of imperial policy.

Burma specialists will find that *Gentlemen Capitalists* is a useful book because it shows that while the three Anglo-Burman Wars were local affairs they

actually reflect economic and political realities which were generally true for both much of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Webster has certainly done his homework: one the strengths of *Gentlemen Capitalists* is the fact that the argument is well-grounded in a range of historiography. Historians would do well to place their research as carefully as Webster in a framework defined by the fruits of recent scholarship. The result is that Webster is able to write incisively about developments in Sabah, Singapore, Burma, Siam and Malaya while showing how each fits into a much broader picture of British commerce and imperial expansion. Yet, there is much (such as the first two Anglo-Burman wars) to Webster's narrative of British expansion, which does not stem from intentions of London capitalists. His synthesis of recent scholarship is impressive, but leads this reviewer to wonder if the idea of the 'gentleman capitalist' is really the best way to emplot the story of British expansion in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, *Gentlemen Capitalists* is a well-researched book which will interest a wide range of historians.

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